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"And the Light Flood Over the Land": Reading Region in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead

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Gilead was and continues to be a truly formative part of my life. I began to read this novel in my first apartment, two summers ago, staying up until the early morning while my partner was asleep next to me. As I was reading this book I began to discover more and more what it means to be in love, and to live in love. Through this love, I find the world to be overflowing with a passion, an energy, that I certainly cannot grasp, but see around me, every day. It was in this book that I first saw the possibility for reverence, the hope that I could stand in radical amazement before life. This project is but one attempt at how part of this book does its work; a book that, to quote Neil Young, has left me, in only the best of ways, "helpless, helpless, helpless."

"American identities are rooted in places on the national map, regions that are related to one another by directional signifiers: North/South, East/West. In these regions, time converges with space; the bright promise of a bountiful future comes down to Earth."
- Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf, *All Over the Map* (vii.)

"The Midwest, it would seem, is a place where, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein's famous line, there is no there, there."
- Andrew Cayton, "The Anti-region" (142)

"This morning a splendid dawn passed over our house on its way to Kansas. This morning Kansas rolled out of its sleep into a sunlight grandly announced, proclaimed throughout heaven—one more of the very finite number of days that this old prairie has been called Kansas, or Iowa. But it has all been one day, that first day. Light is constant, we just turn over in it."
- Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (209-10)

In his review of Marilynne Robinson's second novel *Gilead*, Lee Siegel makes the curious claim that "unless you are a believing Christian with *strong fundamentalist leanings*, you cannot truly understand *Gilead*" (emphasis mine). Certainly, the designation of "religious" follows soon after Robinson and her work. In both her fiction and essays, Robinson is unabashedly forward about her inclination towards, and understandings of, faith. In *Gilead* (2004) and her most recent novel *Home* (2008), Robinson's subject matter is steeped in small-town American Christianity and its spiritual practice; *Gilead* is narrated by an aging Congregationalist minister from Gilead, Iowa, while *Home* tells the story of the same town's Presbyterian minister and his prodigal son. Robinson's non-fiction adds depth to this religious scope through thorough reconsiderations of the historical framework necessary for this Christian project. In various essays Robinson defends Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Calvin ("Dietrich Bonhoeffer," "Marguerite de Navarre," "Marguerite de Navarre, Part II" from *The Death of Adam*)[1], and even Adam Smith (" "Americans" ") through re-readings of their Christian thought.

The curious nature of Siegel's argument then lies not in the Christian location, but rather in the "fundamentalist" bent he ascribes as necessary to a full understanding of *Gilead*. Robinson's advocacy for religion, is based in how faith recognizes the "mystery" in existence:

> There is no strictly secular language that can translate religious awe, and the usual response to this fact among those who reject religion is that awe is misdirected, an effect of ignorance or superstition or the power of suggestion and association. Still, to say that the universe is extremely large, and that the forces that eventuate in start clusters and galaxies are very formidable indeed, seems deficient—qualitatively and aesthetically inadequate to its subject. ("The Human Spirit and the Good Society," from *When I Was a Child I Read Books* 159)

For Robinson this argument is rooted in the mainline Protestant Church, whether it be that of her Presbyterian parents or her current membership in the United Church of Christ. It is in these *liberal* Christian spaces that Robinson finds mystery recognized as such: "Only in church did I

[1] All further citations from these essays will be from *The Death of Adam.*

hear experiences like mine acknowledged, in all those strange narratives, read and expounded and, for all that, opaque as figures of angels painted on gold" ("Psalm 8," from *Adam* 228-9). She finds no recognition of this mystery in the overly assured faith of America's evangelical community; indeed many of her most passionate interactions with religion actually pivot on severe criticism of both the theology and the politics of the religious right; "Just as discredited institutions close the path to Christian faith for many good people, undignified, obscurantist, and xenophobic Christianity closes the path for many more… I personally would not be surprised to see the secular enter heaven before them" ("Wondrous Love," from *When I Was a Child* 137).

Judging by Robinson's wide literary reception – which includes a PEN/Faulkner award for her first novel *Housekeeping* (1980), the Orange Prize as well as a National Book Award finalist for *Home*, and a Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead* – the author has clearly been accepted by much of the secular reading community. Robinson's work is also continuously valorized in popular, liberal, and critical circles generally not open to the fundamentalist community. Whether we look at more "edgy" publications like Dave Eggers' San Francisco-based *The Believer*, where Nick Hornby can call *Gilead* a "modern classic, and it hasn't even been in print for five minutes" (81); venerated standards like *The Atlantic* who have not only generously reviewed the range of Robinson's work, but also frequently publish her essays; or even the intellectual *Paris Review*, which featured an interview with the author in their "The Art of Fiction" (no. 198), Robinson's appeal does appear to be more widespread than that afforded by Siegel's evaluation.

In contrast to this widespread popularity, the academic community has generally kept a certain distance from Robinson, and especially from *Gilead*. In one sense this is can be credited to the novel's recent publication and the common temporal gap that often occurs between publication and academic response. The issue, though, is that we *do* have a small selection of

scholarly articles on *Gilead*, published almost entirely in Christian literature journals (*Christianity and Literature* devoted an issue to Robinson and *Gilead* in Winter 2010). We can surely understand the embracing and celebration of Robinson by the religious critics. Posed against much of her contemporary peers, Robinson is one of a select few popular novelists whose acceptance of God and faith is preliminary and central to all of their work. Thus, in these religious publications we find mostly mainline Protestant critics using Robinson to figure the viability of certain aspects of their theology in (or arguably by avoiding) the post-modern discourse on literature. The lack of secular academic response, partnered with this religious proliferation, exhibits what I see as an academic encamping of Robinson in her religious role.

Gilead is the most religious of Robinson's three novels. The novel is composed as a letter from the Reverend John Ames to his young son, born out of a second marriage that came late in the minister's life. The text serves as a series of recollections and lessons from this dying man; in Ames words, "I'm trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought you up myself, father and son in the usual companionable way" (102). In the series of letters we read Ames' family and history; his grandfather and father both preachers, his brother an atheist professor. The history of his hometown Gilead, and the region more generally, is also given, with emphasis placed on the area's abolitionist past. The novel's final focus is on the return of Ames' troubled godson Jack, and the conflicts this character conjures in both Ames' public and personal life. Though *Gilead* is a story of one man's life, meant to inform the moral well being of his son, the narrative hinges on the Reverend's circadian meditations on existence more generally. Spiritual reflections and biblical quotations are scattered throughout the text, often brought up together:

> There were more fireflies out there than I had ever seen in my life, thousands of them everywhere, just drifting up out of the grass, extinguishing themselves in

> midair… Finally Boughton said, 'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward…' I don't know whether the verse put a blessing on the fireflies or the fireflies put a blessing on the verse, or if both of them together put a blessing on trouble, but I have loved them both a good deal ever since. (72)

In this sense we can begin to see why Siegel would prescribe a "fundamentalist" lens for *Gilead's* readership. The religion of the novel centers on an assumed Godliness in the world, and this assumption, for contemporary America, is often understood as a distinctly evangelical move, part of the necessary groundwork for that community's proselytization and subsequent ventures into the political arena.

Siegel's "fundamentalist" designation can also provide a possible rationale for why Robinson has received such significant middlebrow acceptance, in contrast to her limited response from the academy. Siegel argues that "Robinson currently represents everything that liberal, urbane, ironic culturati are now derided for smugly disdaining," which is implied to be evangelical Christianity, or orthodox religion more generally. "And so image-sensitive liberal, urbane, ironic culturati are going to want to prove their complex open-heartedness by indifferently swooning her new book." Siegel's review – suitably titled "The Believer" – was published in *New York*, and thus speaks from and to the middlebrow reader and critic who has consistently gathered around Robinson. By critiquing specifically this (his) audience, Siegel sees that most of the popular critics have summarily privileged Robinson's form over her content, such that "religion" is consistently mentioned as a central trope, but is never investigated in the kind of depth like that focused on in her prose.[2]

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[2] In her review of *Gilead* in the New *York Times* (Jan. 2, 2005), Verlyn Klinkenborg addresses this mastery of language, "It feels as though Marilynne Robinson rounded up the most ordinary words in the English language, herded them into a single corral, where she could sort them and newly dignify them by turning them into the thoughts of this quiet old man." For example, when Ames describes the breakfast on his birthday morning, "There were marigolds on the table and my stack of pancakes had candles in it. There were nice little sausages besides. And you recited the Beautitdues with hardly a hitch, two times over, absolutely shining with the magnitude of the accomplishment, as well you might… I hate to think what I would give for a thousands mornings like this. For two or three. You were wearing your red shirt and your mother was wearing her blue dress" (185).

I want to argue that Robinson's writing cannot stand alone under academic scrutiny like it can in more public literary circles – and when we move beyond Robinson's language, we return to the problems of religious defense in the 21st century. If Siegel is not alone in thinking Robinson and her implied readers as "fundamentalist," then we can understand why the academy has kept her at bay. Robinson's fictional subject matter does often read more like theology than it does contemporary fiction.[3] The Christian academics have taken up both her language and her religious content (Hobbs, Vander Weele), while the rest of the academy generally leaves Robinson alone, letting her prose and her import float on the top tier of middlebrow success. I believe that Robinson's encampment in religious identity is only a partial reading of the author's work, especially when we turn to the works of non-fiction that defined the author in the twenty-four years between publishing *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*.

This almost quarter-century of narrative silence (excepting a single short story, "Connie Bronson," published in 1986 in the *Paris Review*) has garnered a significant mythology that, like "religion," seems to precede any mention of Robinson's work. On the back cover of Picador's paperback edition of *Gilead* we are first made aware of this book as a literary-temporal event: "Twenty- four years after her first novel, *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson returns with a story…"[4] In much of the popular criticism, there is a tendency to treat *Gilead* almost as a second "first" novel; that this text is entirely new, which, in many ways, it is (most explicitly, the male narrator and the journal form differ greatly from the female narration in *Housekeeping*). Nevertheless, Robinson was publishing often, and at length, during those years between novels,

[3] Mona Simpson addresses the shift from narrative to contemplation that we see Robinson make from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead*. In her *Atlantic* review of Gilead, "The Minister's Tale" (Dec. 2004), she concludes by querying Robinson's classification as a writer: "Marilynne Robinson obviously can write an extraordinary novel. *Gilead* raises the questions of whether she really still wishes to. One hesitates to define *Gilead* exactly as a novel. It is a beautiful book of ideas" (138).

[4] Contrary to my theory of Robinson's religious encampment, Simpson credits the author's "obscurity" – "Robinson is absent from lists of living greats. A Nexis search for her name yields only fourteen hits from 2003" – to this gap between novels (135).

producing a substantial number of essays and reviews, in forums ranging from miniature "About Books" columns published in the *New York Times*, to lengthy endeavors in *The Nation*. This labor of non-fiction culminated in two book-length publications; *Mother Country* (1989) – which addresses nuclear proliferation and environmental degradation in England – and a collection of essays, *The Death of Adam* (1998). In an interview from 2004, Robinson said that "My non-fiction work is absolutely as essential for me as my fiction… The integrity of fiction depends on this work, in my experience" (Johnson). To understand the breadth of this author's critical framework, it appears necessary to look at her work outside of the novel.

In these essays Robinson develops as a public intellectual through critiques of both contemporary and historical matters often situated outside the strictly religious frame. Prevalent among these various essays are polemical advocacies that call for a renewed valuing of our fellow man, radical care for the environment, and the reigning in of market capitalism. In these arguments, Robinson's analyses are characterized by a movement between intensive research, and sweeping, almost mythical, claims.[5] Her sources are nearly always primary, and usually authored by names canonized in the west and the United States. The issue, in Robinson's eyes, is that the American mind no longer deems it necessary to read these texts, even though we use them regularly to define and defend various understandings of the nation's consciousness. Her project is self defined as "a campaign of revisionism, because contemporary discourse feels to me empty and false" (*Death* 2).

A central aspect of this revisionist project is Robinson's regional analysis of American history and culture. In *The Death of Adam* we find that the articles on Calvin, "Psalm Eight," and

[5] For example, at the conclusion of a close reading of Nietzsche and Freud in "Darwinism," Robinson maneuvers the analysis to her contemporary period, arguing in response to the theories of survival of the fittest that, "All the arts and sciences and philanthropies, are *only* possible because civilization is *intrinsically* sociable and collaborative" (*Death* 62).

"Family," are paired with discussions of Northwestern American sentiments,[6] as well as a history of the social and intellectual contributions made by abolitionists in Middle West – "a highly distinctive and crucial region which is very generally assumed to have neither culture nor history" ("McGuffey and the Abolitionists," from *Adam* 132).[7] Robinson's specific interest in the Middle West has grown significantly in the last decade. Both *Gilead* and *Home* are based in Iowa, and the questions of the region – its history, culture, people – increasingly arise, if not dominate, the author's more recent interviews (Fay, Gritz, Lynn). In her latest collection of essays, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012), we find a product of this interest in "Who Was Oberlin?" where Robinson articulates the relations between the Second Great Awakening, abolitionist liberal arts colleges, and the radical understandings of justice and equality that came out of the 19th century Middle West. Robinson works upon this history again as part of that revisionist work, here to critique the historiography of the region, and how that impacts the our contemporary understandings of the nation's consciousness:

> What would this country be now if justice, as it was practice at Oberlin 160 years ago, had released the talents and energies and the goodwill of the great majority who if fact remained excluded? The classic American writers, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman, read very differently when it is understood that their visions of equality were not simply patriotic self-delusion but were being acted upon, bravely, strenuously, and in the event, too briefly along the frontier, a region that may have come to symbolize freedom and hope on far sounder grounds than survive in our crude modern mythologies. (181)

I find that in defining Robinson as "religious," we have under-read the idea that her Presbyterianism is of her birthplace Idaho, and for my purposes, her Congregationalism of Iowa (where she now lives and teaches at the Writer's Workshop), and that these locales play important roles in her critical framework. I argue that these explicit interactions with the

[6] From "Wilderness:" "Moses himself would have approved the reverences with which I regarded my elders, who were silent and severe and at their ease with solitude and difficulty. I meant to be like them. Americans from the interior West know what I am describing" (*Death* 246).
[7] All further citations from this essay will be from *The Death of Adam*.

Midwest not only expand the readership for *Gilead* beyond a religious audience, but by focusing on the region of the novel, we might productively enlarge the frame of Robinson's revisionist argument.

In placing *Gilead* under the lens of region, I do not mean to attempt at a traditional "regional literature" reading of the novel. If we think of literary regionalism as in part defined by prose style – I am thinking specifically of Faulkner's "Southern" speech here – Robinson does not fit the frame. Her syntax, though beautiful, is distinctly proper and simple, situated between her professorial and preacher[8] selves, though certainly not exemplary of any regional dialect. Furthermore, *Gilead's* Midwest is not isolated, but rather often interacting with the rest of the nation and its issues. In a larger sense, I want to look at the Middle West in *Gilead* because fictional interrogations of Midwestern identity are so sparsely figured in the American canon, and even those few widely read texts are deeply contradictory in their understandings of the region. Sherwood Anderson, John Updike and Richard Wright are all arguably writing Midwestern novels, but the rural, suburban, and urban spaces these authors respectively take up seem to speak over and around each other, rather than coalescing around some notion of regional identity. It appears to me fruitful to find new contributions to this limited discourse.

I have thus chosen to step outside the framework of literary regionalism so as to employ the inspiring theoretical frameworks articulated by the cultural historians in the New Regionalist project. Over the past two decades there has been a renewed interested in the idea of region, and specifically after the contributions of post-structuralism, the region as a constructed rather than resolute entity. Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf sum up the core of this project in their now central text, *All Over the Map*: "To think historically about regionalism we have to explore this

[8] She often serves as a deacon at her church in Iowa City.

relationship between the "imagined communities" that ideologues conjured into existence and the complex social and cultural conditions they confronted," and that we still confront today (9).

The New Regionalists have made significant headway in critically engaging the South, West, and New England, but until the last few years rarely entered the Midwest. That realm of the project is now growing, but only recently began holding initial conferences.[9] As a region, the Middle West is ill defined in both cartographic and cultural geography. Are Michigan or Ohio part of the Midwest, and if so what about Missouri (Shortridge, *The Middle West* 11)? Are any cities really Midwestern (Shortridge, "Persistence" from *The New Regionalism* 58-60)?[10] These questions are large, and only grow larger when investigating popular conceptions of the Midwest. How can a region both be progressive but also conformist (Cayton, "The Anti-region")[11]? Suburban and white, but also urban and black (Cayton and Gray 24-5)? This lack of definition is so great that Andrew Cayton, one of the leading scholars in Midwestern realm of New Regional research, sees the Midwest as possibly non-existent:

> Regions are all about social identity. What matters most is who people think they are, or more specifically, who they think they are not. Certainly that is the case in the Midwest, the most marginal and problematic of major American regions. To the extent that it exists at all (about which I have serious doubts), it is only in people's perceptions of themselves and their relationships with other human beings. (*The New Regionalism* 64)

These historiographical questions certainly inform and frame a reading of Robinson's non-fiction on the Midwest; in light of Cayton, her histories of abolition articulate a version of "who" is the

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[9] "Writing Regionally: Historians Talk about the American Middle West" was held at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in October 1998. This conference brought together a number of historians from the Midwest to discuss the possibilities of a regional history of the Middle West. The conference was organized by Andrew Cayton (Miami University) and Susan Gray (Arizona State University) to be "frankly experimental:" "We invited a group of historians who had published important monographs about subjects located in the Midwest to join us in a conversation about regional identity. We encouraged them to write freely and informally, to be more suggestive than definitive. We emphasized that our goal was to consider the value of a self-conscious Midwestern historiography" (1). These criteria clearly bring New Regional approaches to Midwestern study. The various papers from this conference were compiled in *The American Midwest* (2001), which I use extensively in this project.

[10] All further citations from this essay will be from *The New Regionalism*

[11] All further citations from this essay will be from *The American Midwest*.

Midwesterner. But I believe there is a greater depth to Robinson's Middle West articulated in her fiction. While the social history has raised a number of questions that open the Middle West to inquiry, Robinson produces an affective history in *Gilead* that helps map out this ill-defined region in our imagination.

I.

The town of Gilead, Iowa is the only locale inhabited in the novel's temporal present – the late summer and early fall of 1956. The longest ventures taken by Ames in his old age are from his home to his best friend's porch, or to the church to watch the sunrise when he cannot sleep. Gilead is definitively small in space and population, and only grows smaller due to the select population close enough to Ames to actually speak in the text (Ames' family, his best friend Boughton, and Boughton's son and daughter). In contrast, the novel's constructed past is largely defined by a series of transitory motions of migration, both physical and emotional. This more volatile history centers on Ames' grandfather, a character defined both by his mystical understanding of Christianity and his radical abolitionist practice: "When I was a young man the Lord came to me and put his Hand just here on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And he spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He said, Free the captive" (175). The relatedness of these two worldviews is seen throughout the novel, and are taken up by the grandfather to mean ever moving to the front lines of the abolitionist struggle. By the time of his death, the grandfather has moved from Maine, to Kansas, to Iowa, and back to Kansas. These unremitting, political migrations produce trauma in each generation of the Ames family.

The understanding of the grandfather's birthplace, "Maine," is based off brief iterations that this was the place *before* Kansas, before the fight for abolition – "My grandfather told me once about a vision he'd had when he was *still* living in Maine" (49, emphasis mine). Maine is

only given definition one time in the text; when criticizing Ames' mother and her parenting, the grandfather says, "If you couldn't read with cold feet there wouldn't be a literate soul in the state of Maine" (17). Kansas is considered the grandfather's eternal home, because it was where he fought the most serious battles to end slavery. As readers, we are never witness to any of the actual fighting on this frontier, instead reading of the struggle's impact on his ancient body, and how this form speaks to the radical insatiability of his abolitionist ilk. From the perspective of Ames, his grandson: "He was the most unreposeful human being I ever knew, except for certain of his friends. All of them could sit on their heels into their old age, and they'd do it by preference… They were like the Hebrew prophets in some unwilling retirement" (49-50). This physical anxiety defines much of his relation to Iowa, this being yet another place that is not Kansas. The calm after the War becomes such an anxiety to the grandfather that he eventually leaves Iowa and his family, and returns to Kansas, unable to remedy his spiritual or physical self when away from the locus of his character's definition.

On the familial level the Ames cohort that still resides in Iowa are read as thoroughly distraught by the grandfather's exodus. Though he was a clearly difficult man – specifically with a penchant to give away what little money or food was in the house – his exit is seen as especially painful in light of the abolitionist and religious rationales that defined his challenging character. It is understood that the grandfather left *only* after his son challenged his political theology, specifically that war in the name of God, "has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing" (85). The grandfather's pulpit is defined by a radical, violent read of abolition, while the son, Ames' father, takes abolition to mean pacifist rather than armed struggle. The father concludes that the Civil War was an outright waste of life and eventually leaves his father's church in protest (99). The grandfather's return to Kansas is understood to be the final split

between his radicalism and his son's pacifism, a fissure never remedied in the grandfather's lifetime. The depth of sorrow in this division is made clear through Ames' father's remorse about that period: "My father said he had regretted and repented his whole life since that time but never sufficiently, because at first staying away seemed an act of principle almost" (100). At this initial locus of migration – self-exile from one's father, then the father's own exodus – we can begin to see how Robinson attempts at producing an emotional depth that is contingent on the historical Midwest.

It is only through Ames that we see these debates between the grandfather and father. He defends both patriarchs at certain points, while judging each at other moments in the text. In retelling his father's recollections of the months after the war, Ames recounts the grandfather at his most radical moment: "He said half the graves in the churchyard were new. And there was his father, preaching every Sunday on the divine righteousness manifested in it all" (87). It is at this point that the father, himself a veteran of the war, left for the Quaker church. Here, Ames does much of the work that would be assumed by the reader if the text was told by more than one voice, or even a less intimate first person narration: "Now, I've tried to imagine myself in my grandfather's place. I don't know what else he could have said, what else he could have taken to be true. He did preach those young men into the war." Yet we see also how Ames' judgment is forestalled, through an attempt to hold both sides of a problem as true; yes it was devastating, but also, "It was an honorable thing that my grandfather came back to his congregation and stayed with it, to look after those widows and orphans" (88). These deliberations heighten the import of the regional past in part because they inform the morality Ames' crafts for his son, specifically the repeated lesson to hold opposing concepts as both true.

I argue that the proximity we hold to Ames, and the subsequent closeness of Ames to his family, promotes a certain kind of interaction with these political elements in the history of the Midwest. In this novel we are not reading only of the abolitionists and pacifists, or radical Presbyterians and momentary Quakers of the region, but of a progressive *family*. When Ames' writes to his son, "I will tell you some more old stories," he communicates the pain of his grandfather's politics and the sorrow in his father's choices (104). This emotional gravity is one understanding of abolition in *Gilead's* region. It can be argued that the family unit is too small to encompass the expanse of region.[12] Ames appears to provide a rationale for familial analysis, and though it is self-fulfilling (*Gilead* is a message from father to son), I find it mostly sufficient: "The planets may all have been sloughed from the same star, but still the historical dimension is missing from that simile, and it is true that we all do live in the ruins of the lives of other generations, so there is a seeming continuity which is important because it deceives us" (198). The necessary work is to figure this historicity in our ancestry; here, how the Ames family can work to illuminate the complicated politics of abolition in the Middle West.

If we have come to understand today's Midwest as white-bread and suburban, it was once figured as "pastoral" and "mature," solid in its foundations and articulating the best of America. Indeed it was often reiterated, from the late 19th century through the early 20th century (roughly Ames' childhood to early adulthood), and still sometimes today, that the Middle West is the "most American part of America" (Shortridge, *The Middle West* 27-33). Contrary to both the proverbially "old" nature of the East and the relative youth engendered by the West, the Middle West represented the nation in its adulthood, more stable and secure than its coastal counterparts.

[12] Shortridge addresses the largeness and fluidity of the region by comparing it against the nation or state in both geographic and social terms: "[Regions] are far too big to know in an intimate way, but (unlike states and nations) they receive almost no artificial reinforcement. The south is a partial exception here, but no Western flag exists, no Midwestern anthem. Students are never forced to take a jingoistic course in Midwestern history and…no agreement even exists as to where this particular region is located" ("Persistence" 46)

The pastoral ideal of the Midwest stood to balance out the industrial grind of the East (which was then facing the paradox of a moneyed elite paired with massive immigrations) and the vagabond, insecure frontier of the West, all while producing the new ideal American – on the farm, ready to consolidate his differences and the problems of the nation around him. The geographer and Midwestern cultural historian James Shortridge explains that, "The flattering image of the Middle West as a mature rural paradise filled with wholesome, progressive people was virtually unchallenged between 1898 and 1915, regardless of what geographical boundaries were used to delimit the region" (Shortridge, *Middle West* 35-6). Yet, in these same decades in *Gilead*, Ames grapples with, and challenges, exactly these concepts – what makes the Midwestern figure "wholesome," and especially how he came to be "progressive."

Shortridge's Midwesterner seems to be built on a contradiction in terms. The idea that "mature" and "wholesome" people were also "progressive" appears discordant with our current discourse around the *most* American regions or peoples. I would argue that today we craft apolitical ideal figures, certainly not individuals who would be seeking such radical measures as the end of slavery or outlawing the consumption of alcohol, both of which are central facets of the historical Midwestern "progressive." If the Middle West's deep Americanness derived from a middleness of age and landscape, we can understand the lack of conversations afforded in the history like the acrimonious debate between Ames' grandfather and father, and the subsequent splintering of the family. But if we look into this distinct progressive moment and its relation to place, as Robinson does in both her non-fiction and *Gilead*, we see a regional complexity that, though set against a pastoral landscape, does not exemplify a fully formed, or mature, political consciousness, but rather a more open and difficult discourse.

Though I argue that Robinson's fictional consideration of Midwestern abolitionist history provides affective depth, this project in *Gilead* exhibits a narrow historical and critical lens. The history of pacifism and radicalism sits only in the most left arena of the social history in America during and after the Civil War. In *Gilead's* history there is only a debate about how Christians would work to end slavery, ignoring entirely the very real history of Christian support for the institution. As Christopher Douglas argues, "Robinson's Christianity is short on doctrine and long on wonder, mystery and wisdom," but is not historically critical (337-9). There is not a single interaction in *Gilead* with the biblical or Christian rationales for slavery, or any of their proponents. The only non-abolitionist figure we meet in the text's past is a United States solider sent to find John Brown, who had recently spent the night in the grandfather's church (106-8).

Furthermore, the "progressive" population, and really the entire novel, is made up of mainline, Protestant whites. While I stress the importance of migration in the text, there is no immigration to speak of, no residence preceding Maine. William Deresiewicz centers his critique of Robinson on this American-bred read of progressive history and thought. In his review of *Gilead* in *The Nation* he goes so far as to claim that, "one would scarcely guess from Robinson's writing that there has even been in the United States such a thing as a Catholic or a Jew, that the country has been home to vast populations of immigrants," and that, "stray remarks suggest a kind of Anglo-Saxon tribalism on Robinson's part." In many ways what we have in *Gilead* is a distinctly closed social and political sphere, only open to the right kind of liberal and Christian persons and histories. Deresiewicz's strongest critique, and I believe his best analysis, is that the lack of immigrants, or any mention of the social programs of the 1930s, reduces the progressive capacity in the United States of the novel. Robinson appears so ardent to critique the 21st century by means of the abolitionist example, that she ignores most of the history that has transpired in

the meantime; according to Deresiewicz, "The continuity of progressive ideals across American history: that is what is missing," from *Gilead* and much of Robinson's work more generally.

II.

Without dismissing these criticisms, the motions of intrafamilial migration in *Gilead* can provide further avenues for critical, regional work, specifically in the physical travels taken by Ames and his father when seeking out the grandfather's lost grave in Kansas. It is during the recollections of these travels that we are first given much of the family history, including the national map traversed by the grandfather; "So much of what I know about those old days comes from the time my father and I spent wandering around together lost in Kansas" (104). If we can see the conflicts between grandfather and father as migrations of philosophy that lead to physical exile, the journey by the narrator to Kansas is a migration initially considered in material concerns, then later developing metaphysical depth.

In this "return" we read about the poverty and draught in the Midwest in the late 19th Century – the same period that Shortridge characterizes' as "wholesome," or complete. There is initially an economic infeasibility: "[My father] didn't really have enough money to take the trip at that time, but it was so much in his thoughts that he couldn't wait until he had saved up for it" (10-11). The church is assumedly not strong enough in Gilead to support this expenditure on behalf of their pastor, exemplifying both the relative youth of the town, and the hardships of the old frontier. Upon actually entering Kansas, the land lacks infrastructure or resources: "We had so much trouble keeping the horses watered that we boarded them at a farmstead and went the rest of the way on foot" (10). Food is scarce, if available at all – in a comic but telling anecdote, the father is almost shot when stealing a carrot, the vegetable "so big and old and tough he had to

whittle it into chips. It was about like eating a branch and there was nothing to wash it down with, either" (15).[13]

There is an ascetic and ancient quality to this journey, due to the overwhelming physical lack and the slow pacing of both the literal movements, as well as the prose. Though the passage only lasts eight pages, it makes sense when Ames says, "We'd both gotten thin, and our clothes were in bad shape. The whole journey didn't take quite a month," for we feel the deep sense of time in this "great adventure" (15). The prose pivots on the various ways of slowing down, both of the narrative itself and the reader's way of reading. Paragraphs are given to describing the simple intricacies of landscape (which I will address at greater length later) and human labor, specifically the cleaning up of the grandfather's grave, and the gravestones that surround him. "My father and I fixed up the fence as best we could. He broke up the grave a little with his jackknife" (12), only to then decide it necessary to clean the entire gravesite, "he started cutting the brush back with a hand scythe he had brought, and we set up the markers that had fallen over—most of the graves were just outlined with stones, with no names or dates or anything on them at all" (13).

> I remember that the incompleteness of it seemed sad to me. In the second row we found a marker someone had made by stripping a patch of bark off a log and then driving the nails partway in and bending them down flat so they made the letters REV AMES. The R looked like the A and the S was a backward Z, but there was no mistaking it. (12)

[13] Though there is not the space here to fully develop this analysis, it would be remiss to not take note of the depth of biblical references made in this journey. When reflecting on the journey towards the end of the novel Ames acknowledges that, "I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into that desolation" (191). In the passage following Kansas is compared to Horeb, the biblical location where Moses first meets God at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1) and also the same place where God speaks to Elijah after the prophet's exile from the Israelites (1 Kings 19:8). Further references derive from the Exodus narrative itself. The barren land of Kansas can be read parallel to wilderness after Egypt, "From the wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community continued by stages as the Lord would command. They encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink" (Exodus 17:1). The fecundity of grasshoppers in the grandfather's graveyard – "Everywhere you stepped, little grasshoppers would fly up by the score, making that snap they do, like striking a match (13) – draws connections to the locusts brought down by God as the eighth plague against Pharoh and Egypt, "For if you refuse to let My people go, tomorrow I will bring locusts on your territory. *They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land*" (Exodus 10:4-5, emphasis mine). The use of Hebrew Bible references in Robinson's ecology could be a possible area for future work.

We are jettisoned out of these literal encounters and asked to interact with the spiritual depth imbedded in the work of this son and grandson. The gravesite is so ravished that it necessitates a conversation between the philosophical and literal halves of Ames narration; "If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place. But it was parched and sun-stricken. It was hard to imagine the grass had ever been green." The more physical elements take momentary precedent, as both laboring men are careful not to step on any of the gravestones, all of which are overgrown with this dry grass. Yet, this caution is soon utilized to reflect on the spiritual teachings of Ames' father – "My father always said when someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore" – and the affective depth inherent in their journey more generally; "But there we were, half killing ourselves to find a grave, and as cautious as we could be about where we put our feet" (13). These spiritual encounters denote revelry in the historical land, reinforcing the affective depth in the region's past.

After the final, intensive day of "putting things to rights" at the grave, Ames attempts at silent reflection, while his father takes part in prayer, "remembering his father to the Lord, and also asking the Lord's pardon, and his father's as well." Because he cannot pray at his father's length, the young Ames turns to the horizon:

> And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth. (14)

Ames shares this moment with his father, and the two watch this astronomical interaction until its completion, "And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed

amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon" (14-5). The holiness of this encounter is contingent on a specific understanding of space – here the flatlands flat enough to see these celestial spheres in tandem. We come to understand that this revelry could only occur on these specific plains, in desolate Kansas. Ames' father concludes the passage, and the journey, on this note, "I would never have thought this place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that" (15).

The final migration in this schema occurs when Ames' father leaves Gilead for the Gulf Coast. Though the rationale provided is a need for better health in a warmer climate, Ames takes his father's exodus as an offense, but also as a means to reinforce both his sense of home in Gilead, and his faith. The father attempts to convince Ames to leave the town and the pulpit, "He told me that looking back on Gilead from any distance made it seem a relic, an archaism," and later the father writes, "I have become aware that we here lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them." Here too, the regional history of the town is brought up and criticized under the father's framework of "Old, unhappy far-off things and battles long ago." Ames is tasked with defending the history of the place, as well as his "local" and particular approach to religious practice and leadership, "All he accomplished was to make me homesick for a place I never left" (235).

The last third of *Gilead* largely deals with the narrative of Boughton's prodigal son Jack, and his interactions with Ames. In Jack's telling, and Ames' retelling, of his troubled life, we read about his various childhood nuisances, which include shattering Ames' windows (182), and an extramarital affair in his college years where he abandoned the child (156-9). In the novel's present, Jack has African American wife and child in Memphis, which raises a number of moral questions about his father's expected (negative) response (217-30). The gravity of this situation

grows especially large because Jack has returned to Gilead to see if he could make a life there for his family (231-2). Jack's character injects a certain drama to the text, his narrative providing more "plot" – increased conversation, larger pool of characters, a chapter break – than we see elsewhere in the novel. In Jack's narratives we find motions of suspense, romance and intrigue, rather than Ames' lengthy considerations of 20th century theology, or his recap of that afternoon's baseball game and the aesthetics thereby produced from a radio.[14]

Just before Jack leaves Gilead, his insider/outsider position in the community yields a different interest in the landscape than we access in Ames; "As we walked [Jack] glanced around at the things you never really look at when you live in a town—the fretting on a gable, the path worn across an empty lot, a hammock slung between a cottonwood and a clothesline pole" (240). These physical demarcations provide impetus for figuring the social and political concerns in the town; "I knew what hope [Jack's] was. It was that kind the place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could be lived here unmolested." This history is in and part of the landscape, a land which in turn informs Ames' understanding of spiritual life; "To play catch of an evening, to smell the river, to hear the train pass. These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace" (242).[15]

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[14] "And there was baseball. I listened to thousands of baseball games, I suppose. Sometimes I could just make out half a play, and then static, and then a crowd roaring… It felt good to me to imagine it, like working out some intricate riddle in my mind, planetary motion. If the ball is drifting toward left field and there are runners on first and third, then—moving the runners and the catcher and the shortstop in my mind. I loved to do that, I can't explain why" (44). Or later, "We have a television now, a gift from the congregation with the specific intent of letting me watch baseball and I will. But it seems quite two-dimensional beside radio" (126). For further analysis of baseball and memory in *Gilead* see Hobbs.

[15] We can find a number of examples in regional history where physical markers connote metaphysical depth. A poignant example of this process is articulated in the classic (and reviled) defense of the Southern life, *I'll Take My Stand*. The "Twelve Southerners" who published this now infamous text – including literature professors, poets, and novelists – discard intellectual history, instead foregrounding lifestyle as *the* central tenant for the best in art and thought. This iteration of humanism is read as birthed from the soil, "rooted in the agrarian life of the older South," as if, like cotton, it can grow only when tilled on Southern land. The raw material comes to full fruition, not through any intellectual or social labor, but rather in the daily life of the Southern socialite; "[humanism] was deeply founded in the way of life itself—in its tables, chairs, portraits, festivals, laws, marriage customs" (xvi). The problems in this figuration abound, most specifically in that those elements considered central to the best parts of the

The role of Midwestern landscape in figuring Ames' faith is considered most dramatically at the novel's end. Only a page before *Gilead's* conclusion, we find one of the most powerful passages in the text, where Ames navigates the path between his interactions with the spirit and those with the land:

> I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word "good" so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy," but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well. Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view (246).

If the Ames family's history brought sorrow and remorse into our understanding of Midwestern abolition, then here we find the culmination of Ames' attempt to exhibit the revelry that pervades in the Midwestern landscape. The novel ends with Ames' meditation on the town, given in this address to his son. While recognizing that the town is slowly dying, and that surely his son will leave Gilead, he concludes by expressing his adoration for the place, "I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence" (247).

There is little, if any, distance between Robinson's "religious" and "regional" projects *because* of these interactions with the land. "To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded" – we find that religion and region work to reinforce one another. The way this relation is posed through the lens of landscape appears important for the regional study of the Middle West. Returning to questions posed by New Regionalism, Ayers begins to address the importance of landscape in his essay, "What We Talk about When We Talk

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human condition are only afforded to those capable of leisure, which was historically possible in the South due to slavery. What we can find in this brief iteration is a similar process to that in *Gilead* whereby the physical facets reinforce and fill out the meaning of region, and region works to give depth to seemingly inane structures.

about the South." He initially reiterates that, "Geographers have noted that Americans, with remarkable uniformity and consistency, picture their country's regions in ways that blur their diverse human characteristics into stereotypes," and then argues that this process of uniformity is dependent on the geography itself – in his analysis, how the Southern Trough is a largely devalued location because of its topography and thereby the population itself is considered poorly (*All Over the Map* 62-3).

We need only return to the metaphors of the plain, level headed, pastoral Midwesterner to find similar connections to the flat and monochrome Great Plains that serve as the setting for *Gilead*. The culmination of all this Midwestern normalcy is read by Cayton to produce "The Anti-region," meaning, "Students look for regionalism in landscapes, food, immigrants, crops… But we will never find the Midwest, if there is such a place, in those subjects" ("The Anti-region" 148). There is so little distinction in the accepted regional traits that we must turn elsewhere, if at all, for any kind of Midwestern regional study.[16] Shortridge believes, in relative contrast to Cayton, that rather than there being no region, the physical understanding of the Middle West is one based in nostalgia. He looks specifically at the rise of industry in the Midwest during the 1950s and '60s, and the opposition this posed to the nostalgic images of the rural frontier. Shortridge argues that this need for nostalgia is so strong that we have shifted the literal center of the Midwest such to find places that match the pastoral image. In his study, conducted in 1989, the "cognitive map" of respondents now places the center of the Midwest in Nebraska and Kansas, moving the region away from industrial centers (*Middle West* 82-90).

[16] Cayton later suggests, as a starting point, that we look into the Midwest's own pursuit of normalcy, "Perhaps what is most distinctive about the Midwest is a tendency on the part of many of its citizens to be uncomfortable with the whole idea of being distinctive…they take pride in being typical rather than unusual, when they boost their families, towns, and states as better versions of some vague, elusive American norm" (158)

What we find in *Gilead* is the active situating of a narrative in both the plainness and the nostalgia of the region. Indeed, the novel takes place in Iowa, which Shortridge explains to be the exemplary state for finding and defining Midwestern characteristics (*Middle West* 99-100). Yet rather than coming to the conclusion that there is no Middle West, or that it no longer "actually" exists, the novel poses a defense of a the Midwestern landscape, based out of the revelry, or spiritual impact, it imparts on Ames. As I hope to have made clear, there is no designation made between the land and the spirit, or between religion and history, but rather an interdependent necessity for these variables in and of each other. What we can find in *Gilead* is picture of the Midwest that expands beyond the limits we so often find in the rather one-dimensional historical imagination. Though Robinson's own frame is certainly historically and socially limited, her work with landscape exemplifies a depth we do not see in either the model of nostalgia, or the "Anti-region." Instead, the Midwestern plains help to articulate an affective understanding of Middle West that serve as necessary element to the novel's philosophy, theology, and its prose.

III.

Robinson's Middle West is understood as a product of abolitionism and the Civil War, and so her focus on the region, even today, centers on those places that were/are defined by that historical moment (Oberlin, Grinnell, etc.). In Robinson's read, at least in the essays, we are to study the Midwest because this is where the political sentiments that led to the end of slavery were harbored and grown – and, importantly, where Lincoln was born. There seems to be a sense in her work that there is a special character of person in the Middle West, such that the region could produce so great a depth of progressive thought and so numerous a group of liberal practitioners. "To wonder where those audiences came from whose intelligence and patience and

humanity taught and encouraged Abraham Lincoln to speak as he did," appears to be the general focus of Robinson's historical project as it pertains to the Midwest, which she sees as keeping with the revisionist goal that define her essays ("McGuffey" 146).

Robinson frequently critiques the historical practice of her contemporaries as too eager to judge, and too willing take the upper hand in discourse:

> There's a holier-than-thou quality in the way that we approach the past… Everything has an exposé quality about it, as if the fact that someone did something wrong completely cancels out the fact that they may have done something remarkable – as though, if we were Abraham Lincoln, we'd have done it better. Probably not. It's a sort of prudishness without even the dignity of meaningful standards. It's inhumane (Propson).

The revisionist task, regarding the Midwest, is to read again those primary sources of history – in "The McGuffey Readers," a collection of mid-Nineteenth Century primers – to see how this region incorporated anti-slavery sentiments into everyday life. This historical approach to abolition argues that what these people were doing was good, and would continue to be good, if only we would give their history a chance to speak in the today's public discourse.

The problem in Robinson's Midwestern history is that she considers place as defined by its historical actors, and those actors defined by place, without isolating either variable. In the case of Lincoln, the role of his community is valued as necessary to the President's heroism, but that same community's positive attributes are defined only by the President's public role. This same formula applies to "Grant, Sherman, and so many others [who] emerged from the Middle West during the crisis of the Civil War" ("McGuffey" 147). For this analysis to make any sense, we must assume that the Midwest has a metaphysical consciousness conducive to liberal thought and practice, and that each of these political leaders could harness that energy for the good of the nation. Regardless of whether this transcendental quality lies in the leader or their hometown, for Robinson it has to be somewhere – always already existing in the region – else we have no way

to begin a "progressive" discourse. In this same essay on the McGuffey readers, we find a possible terminology for these presuppositions when Robinson talks about, "where the Middle West acquired its *special tradition* of intellectualism and populism, moral seriousness and cultural progressivism" (147, emphasis mine).[17] Maybe Robinson, who has lived in the significantly homogenous Iowa, knows where this tradition lies, and what it can do, and maybe an audience for whom she is writing is privy to this "special" knowledge as well. The echoes of Southern agrarianism are rather haunting if not for the general assumption that abolition was indeed a good thing, which, in all regards, seems to be bulk of the "revisionist" argument we find in Robinson's history of the Middle West.

In her essay "Wilderness," Robinson states that, "There is no group in history I admire more than the abolitionists" (*Death* 260). I believe many of her historiographical problems also derive from the unquestionable heroism she assigns to that political and historical community. This passion is a site of Robinson's historical amnesia, specifically in her ignorance to any of the criticisms made against the abolitionists in the past fifty years (in Robinson's framework these recent assessments may be another example of naïve critique, like those leveled against Lincoln). We can attempt to forgive this blindness, if only because Robinson's role as a public intellectual is often defined by a purposeful ignorance to post-modernity, or any of the post-structural methods of critique (arguably we could extend her gaps even to the modern project. Robinson is known to say that she does not read much of any literature published after the Nineteenth Century). The larger problem facing Robinson's abolitionists is not then their uniform figurations, but rather that their history is static – the historicity is so goal-oriented such that they

[17] Robinson's emphasis of the local echoes the problems of this sort of tradition. In the Commencement Address she gave at the College of the Holy Cross in 2011 she queries how the standards of the nation could be so debased if the local culture is so fruitful, "It is surprisingly characteristic of any place in the country that people love it and are there for that reason. So their performances are local and their literatures are regional, and none of us has any reason to assume that they are not, therefore of the first quality."

never act outside the historian's frame. Robinson's close reading in the essays only works to exemplify the virtues of this community and her purpose to defend their legacy has left them as only working out, but never acting within, the problems of history.

I argue that Robinson's read of history is not so much concerned with history or historiography as they are generally employed. Robinson is certainly a writer and intellectual focused on building a grand importance for her subjects. In recalling her arguments on Christian history we see this come to bear in sweeping conclusions such as, "Watching with Christ at Gethsemane, Bonhoeffer worked at loving the world" ("Bonhoeffer" 122). In theology these kinds of magnanimous arguments and conclusions are not only acceptable but also expected, while in historical study they create a series of dilemmas. I find that Robinson is concerned not so much for the history of her historical actors, but rather, something more in line with a theological read of Lincoln or the Midwest. The emphasis on the Middle West seems to be of a more transcendental quality; that the abolitionists of the region exemplify not necessarily their historical condition (or at least Robinson fails to make this clear), but rather, they exhibit the transcendence of that history through their value of intellect, belief in community, and respect for human dignity, all of which Robinson would like to see more of in the 21st century ("Who Was Oberlin?").

I believe the novel, as a form, is more forgiving to Robinson's "history" than the essay. Robinson's own definition of history is truly vague, though it helps to figure the functions of history in her fiction: "History is what we know about what we are, and is always relevant" (Johnston). The past clearly plays a significant role in each of her novels, especially in *Gilead*. Yet, there is little mention of specific years in the novel, producing a sort of temporal landscape that feels closer to the physical expanse of Kansas than it does to chronology; that is, we

understand where we are by broad strokes – the frontier and the 19th century, rural Iowa and the 1950s – that are dotted with locations of revelation and importance. Both the essays and *Gilead* address the same historical subjects of abolition and the Midwest, but I argue that the history reads far different in the context of fiction. The openness of "what we know about what we are," works beneficially in novel to delineate additional layers of affective depth in the Midwest.

The historical method in *Gilead* exhibits a significant departure from the essays' polemical frame, in that those same historical actors in abolition are figured as faulty and imperfect, and that their mistakes and their glory are part of how we can understand Iowa, Kansas, or the Midwest. In these parts of *Gilead*, Robinson moves away from both her posture of defense, as well as the novel's earlier constructions of sorrow and remorse, instead building comedy into the abolitionist history. In another story from Ames' grandfather, we read about a small abolition town in Iowa and their failed experiment to build a tunnel between the store and the stable. The import of this situation is initially figured in terminology that recalls the problematics in Robinson's critical framework. "These were sensible and well-meaning people," set on a land that seems destined for their labor; "The topsoil in Iowa goes down so deep that more and larger tunnels were possible here than in less favored regions, say in New England" (58). Both the region and its people would again be predefined by their cause if not for the humorous events that soon arise.

The problems in this tunnel, a physical microcosm of the larger project of abolition, exemplify the more lived history that we find wanting in Robinson's polemic. Though this labor is "the work of people of high religious principle" (59), it was also conducted in a way that "lost sight of certain practical considerations." The group becomes so lost in the ideal practice of tunnel making – "It became a sort of civic monument. One of the old men said the only thing

missing was a chandelier" – that the structure literally does not work. The specific problems remind us of the destitution of the historical moment, of the absolute infrastructural lack on the frontier before the Civil War; "Very simply they made it too large, and too near the surface of the ground, and they couldn't brace it, either, since wood was so scarce on the prairie in those days" (58). Judging from Robinson's essays, this population had never erred in its theory, but in those essays we do not read of any abolitionist labor. In the essay on Oberlin, the history is of radical founders and actors, not on how the swamps were drained or the fugitive slaves were housed. In moving only slightly away from the political and philosophical emphasis, towards a read of labor, we find and opening of space in *Gilead* to address these more social characteristics of the historical abolitionist community.

From here the narrative becomes an exercise on the interactions between history and humor through a series of mishaps relating to the tunnel's structure. When a visitor comes through town, he and his horse stop directly over the tunnel and proceed to fall through its structure. The most pressing issue in this small crisis is that these abolition towns are contested political spaces, especially in the context of the Fugitive Slave Act. That this man is upset, has lost his horse, and only after a number of hours of haggling will accept one of the town's horses, could draw attention to the settlement and to the fugitive slave who is hiding in their community; "They wanted to be sure the stranger got far enough away not to trouble coming back, so it was their best horse they had given him" (61).

Robinson is careful to insert comedy even in those more revisionist angles of the history – here, by reminding the reader that not only abolition, but also prohibition has its roots in that period in the Midwest. The townspeople mix oats and whiskey to put the fallen horse to sleep, "Then the mood of the stranger became desolate, because the horse was not only standing in a

hole but was also unconscious. This latter might not have seemed to crown his afflictions the way it did if he had not himself been a teetotaler." The fallibility of the abolitionists is reinforced by Ames' judgment on this specific instance: "They would have taken no pleasure at all in watching this unoffending stranger tear his beard and throw his hat at the ground. Well, of course they took a little pleasure in it" (59). At this point, these historical figures become as human as the jokester mechanics who Ames passes by on walks to church, "They're not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows… propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes. They're always so black with grease and so strong with gasoline I don't know why they don't catch fire themselves" (5).[18] The building, and then subsequent dismantling, of this tunnel becomes more arduous as it becomes more comic:

> In the meantime, there [the horse] was, sobering up, nickering and switching its tail. So they decided to lift a shed off what it had for a foundation and set it down over the horse there in the middle of the road. It was a small shed, so it had to be set over the horse at a diagonal… Someone noticed that the horses' tail was lying out on the road, so they had to put a child through the shed window to gather it in. (60)

There is almost a sense of pity when we read of these radical frontiersmen who are trying to figure a way to uphold the anonymity required of their purpose. But Robinson does not explicate on this response, rather focusing on the absurdity of the whole situation, thereby saving the narrative from the tautological read she often gives of the period in her non-fiction.

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[18] Ames continues to describe how upon his passing the laughter always stops, and that this is an example of how his role as a preacher keeps him at a certain distance from the community, "I felt like telling them, I appreciate a joke as much as anybody. There have been many occasions in my life when I have wanted to say that. But it's not a thing people are willing to accept. They want you to be a little apart" (5). Ames' preacherly otherness is a trope carried throughout the text, and one that I believe is central to the kind of gaze we are afforded through his narration. We have such a litany of magnificent observations – "I was trying to remember what birds did before there were telephone wires. It would have been much harder for them to roost in the sunlight, which is a thing they clearly enjoy" (165) – because Ames is *always* just enough beyond the scope of interaction that he is observing, rather than fully participating. Outside of the interactions with Jack, Ames never loses himself in others, and thus his control of the narrative, derived in part from his profession, is almost absolute.

The abolitionists themselves are too endowed by their labors to recognize what Ames sees, that "All this seems preposterous" (60). In the narrative's period this role is reserved for the one fugitive slave in the town, who "stayed in the dry-goods store unless there was some ground for alarm," and thus from this point of observation, "saw and heard everything. And it was pretty obvious how much he wanted to laugh. He was just lolling and languishing with the effort it cost him not to do it." This is also the reader's condition, but we are afforded both the political and historical privacy to take part in the humor of the story. "When the shed had been walked down to the road, and just as it was being set crosswise over the horse, there came from the store one harsh, painful, unwilled whoop of laughter" (61). This comic history extends to the core of the abolitionist project; in the case of this Iowan town the narrative builds instances of humor, and humility, into the harboring of fugitive slaves. A significant problem in all of Robinson's work is that there is little mention of slavery itself, only a focus on the efforts to abolish its institution (and the positive aftermath of abolition – liberal arts colleges, small intellectual towns, etc.). In contrast, this narrative in *Gilead* offers an actual slave, who speaks, and also whose character works to further let out the totalizing importance of abolition found in the polemical works. We no longer need to work at identifying with the abolitionist seriousness, because here we have a character, who acts as we, and Ames, have during the story – watching and laughing at those fallible, human, moments that make for a narrative, rather than static history of these central figures in the region's past.

The abolitionist narrative in *Gilead* is made additionally intricate through the appearance of John Brown, and the physical and emotional violence that comes out of his history. Near the novel's midpoint, the text introduces this historical figure as a friend of Ames' grandfather. While the comic structure was employed to exhibit an earnest, or honest fallibility in abolition,

Brown's narrative is employed as part of the earlier discussed political migration between radical and pacifist action. Brown's time in Gilead is told through the recollections of Ames' father, and thus the structure and emphasis falls on those sentiments that led to his exile from the grandfather.

Brown comes to the town as part of a frantic movement across the frontier, gathering recruits for his radical interpretation of abolitionist practice. Ames' grandfather is a devout member of Brown's cohort, opening his church's doors for the horses and the wounded in the group. Due to an unspoken pursuit, the group quickly exits the town, leaving the church in a wretched condition; "He said the church smelled like horses and gunpowder and it smelled like sweat… there was a good deal of blood" (105). Ames father must figure a way to remedy the situation, "especially since that was a Saturday." Physical motions are articulated in detail, "He got a bucket of water and a piece of soap to scrub down that bloodstain, but that just made it bigger. So he ended up sloshing water over the whole floor to make the spot less conspicuous" (106). These minutiae of mechanics take on a similar gravity that we saw at the grandfather's gravesite – here serious because the labor takes place in a church, in the late evening, before the Lord's Day. The sort of metaphor afforded by this specific image is more obvious than we have come to expect from the novel. Violence, or sacrilege, within the church, too easily positions the radical strain of abolitionism as negative, especially when we consider Ames' goal to incorporate opposing arguments as both true.

This critique of violence is certainly a part of the narrative's focus, though only momentary, as we are soon brought out of the church and asked to grapple with the history of the event. A United States solider, presumed to be pursuing Brown, comes into the church and briefly interrogates Ames' father. This interaction is employed to consider the grandfather's

involvement in the radical project. We read later that this soldier did indeed find the group, and Ames' grandfather, chosen "to cover their retreat if occasion arose," shot the man (not mortally). The rationale for this shooting is reasoned like the tunnel, "The congregation had put a lot of thought and effort into hollow walls and hidden cellars in their various cabins… All that effort was for freeing the captives, and it had to be protected for their sake;" if the solider returned, "attention of that kind could destroy everything" (108-9).

Unlike the comic narrative, this more tragic episode leads to the splintering of family. Ames' father holds deep remorse for not attempting to find the wounded solider: "My father said, 'I never did forgive myself not going out there to look for him.' And I felt the truth of that as I have never felt the truth of an other human utterance" (109). This depth of sorrow is set against the grandfather's almost celebratory response to being at war; "There were Sundays when he would ride his horse right up to the church steps just when it was time for service to begin and fire that gun in the air to let the people know he was back" (109-10). The grandfather takes to the conflict by thoroughly engaging its violence into performance – wearing bloodied shirts and his gun at the hip when preaching in the pulpit – while his son responds through moral introspection; "I never dared to ask him what he'd been up to. I couldn't risk the possibility of knowing things that were worse than my suspicions" (110).

Both the comic tunnel and the tragic church are for Ames, "some more old stories," told to his son both as moral lessons and examples of the town and region's history. These are intimate, affective affairs that position Ames in the utmost proximity to those demarcations we use to figure a sense of place. As the journey in Kansas produced revelry in the plains, these *contradictory*, emotive histories inscribe the land, here Iowa, with the emotional impact of imperfect human practice. These various histories may exhibit a more broad understanding of

abolitionist history than is deduced from Robinson's polemical works; they certainly work towards an increasingly affective history for the region. Neither the comic nor the tragic history of abolition read as correct, but rather, both serve to delineate the complex relations Ames has with his family and his home, and thereby inform the parables of advice imparted to his son. There is a sincere complexity to the Middle West in *Gilead's* history, unlike the attempts at parsing plainness that we find in most histories of the region.

In their introduction to *The American Midwest*, Cayton and Susan Gray argue that over the second half of the nineteenth century there were strident efforts made by the middle class to, "[flatten] the complicated and contested history" of the region, "into a linear narrative of unimpeded progress." In reality there were of course a multitude of problems that derived from the conquest of Native Americans and of new land, including draught, poverty and community dissolution, namely much of the attentions in *Gilead*. Yet most of the mythology, or mytho-history, of the Midwest tend towards an understanding of the region without the conflicts or issues so common in the narratives of the South, West, or New England. This young, thriving, and safe region triumphs in our retrospective gaze – in Cayton and Gray's words, "a landscape of small towns and cities, in which banks, stores and public buildings featured prominently." These historians recognize that this image is part of the general project to make easy the Middle West by ignoring these hardships. Though we have come to accept this plain understanding on a national level, the historians make clear that this was an image initially conceived and practiced by Midwesterners, specifically by ignoring, "that the social and economic development of the region had not flowed smoothly, but instead proceeded by fits and starts" (11). In Robinson's novel we see a Midwest critically engaged from a complex history of the region's towns, a

regional narrative articulated often through the moments of calamity we see subdued in the historical image.

Of course it would be impossible to reach a clean history in *Gilead*, if only because Ames narrates a specifically volatile historical moment. The various instances of abolitionist practice exemplify the region in its formative years, not only in political identity, but also in those more cultural notions of progressive practice. The Middle West of Ames' grandfather was never the "center of the nation," instead, in all ways, it is clearly the radical frontier. Nor is Ames' Gilead exemplary of the middleness so often assigned to the region. His mid-20th Century town is in the aftershocks of this history, unsure of its contemporary purpose, still working through the discourses and violence of struggles generations old.

> There have been heroes here, and saints and martyrs, and I want you to know that. Because that is the truth, even if no one remembers it. To look at the place, it's just a cluster of houses strung along a few roads, and a little row of brick buildings with stores in them, and a grain elevator and a water tower with Gilead written on its side, and the post office and the schools and the playing fields and the old train station, which is pretty well gone to weeds now. But what must Galilee have looked like? You can't tell so much from the appearance of a place. (173)

There is distinct choice in this novel's historiography, where both the historian and the history are not from a Midwest of solid definitions, but from a town consistently adding new narratives to its identity, and always working through the affective complexities of its history.[19]

[19] In *The Golden Day* Lewis Mumford addresses the value in these unformed historical moments, when analyzing the cultural shifts in the mid-19th Century United States – specifically the change from Puritanism to Transcendentalism: "In New England, the inherited medieval civilization had become a shell; but, drying up, it left behind a sweet acrid aroma, and for a brief day it had a more intense existence in the spirit. Before the life itself collapsed, men felt the full weight of it in their imagination" (86). We can certainly take fault in Mumford's mythological procession from one historical group to the next. Still, the contribution of remnant moments is intriguing for Robinson's history. The 1850s, late 19th century, and the 1950s are periods before dramatic changes to the understanding of American life. Yet, when regarding *Gilead* these are not merely moments of "leading up to," but are intricate in their own right. In light of Mumford, the novel's historical location is just when the imaginary is most filled out, yet also fluctuating – thereby an apposite period for literary input.

Yet, judging from Cayton's own work, there is nothing complex in the literature of the Middle West. Again, "What distinguishes the Midwest is the absence not just of contested regional meanings, but of any kind of regional discourse itself" and later, "The *imagined and historical literature* that deals with life in the Midwest almost never deals with the region as *a formal phenomenon*" ("The Anti-region" 148, emphasis mine). For Cayton, these formal phenomena are what make arbitrary areas *regions*, and those populations delineated as *regional*: "They give meaning to the patterns of their lives with labels that conjure up *the particular, a specific way of thinking, a specific consciousness*, which grows out of *unique interactions between specific people and specific environments*" ("The Anti-region" 148, emphasis mine). Contrary to Cayton's analysis – where the Midwest only attempts at being unique, and thus a region, by "creating some bizarre phenomenon, like having the largest ball of twine" (148) – Robinson makes possible a distinctive Middle West. In *Gilead,* she crafts a literary and imaginative history that builds a unique relation between people and place – exhibiting a series of eccentric histories that could only happen in the Middle West. For this century's reader, much of Robinson's Midwest is troubling – specifically in the homogenous population of the novel. And in this way Robinson's regional work falls short – it cannot articulate an affective history that includes those racial, urban, and industrial elements that must be included in a more full picture of the Midwest. Certainly, though, the regional work in *Gilead* can move the novel away from its purely religious designation. Rather than argue that these two projects, "region" and "religion," are distinct or opposing, I hope it has become clear that they work in and through each other, always informing the lived history in the novel.

Gilead's affective region is an analysis of the past, though one asking for new thought. By emphasizing the affective weight in a seemingly affectless region, I argue that Robinson is

writing the region, if not into being, then at least into relevance in the 21st century. By emphasizing an affective past, Robinson thoroughly rebuts the historical foundation for Midwestern plainness, instead producing a history and community that are defined by the range of emotional impact. The trauma in familial politics, the revelry and spirituality in the landscape, and the comedy and tragedy of formative historical moments, disrupts that oppressive middleness that so defined the Midwest, and make for a Middle West that is open to future imaginative work.

I have adhered to the honor code in completing this assignment

Joshua Harrington Davidson

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